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Media Release

First generation of working women enters retirement

Like men, they deal with a loss of identity – but they also face issues particular to women

ST CATHARINES, Ontario — May 26, 2014 — A New Brunswick gerontology professor says the first generation of women to have worked all their lives outside the home is now starting to retire.

And as they do, those women are facing serious issues of identity and ageism.

Deborah van den Hoonaard is a professor at St. Thomas University in Fredericton; she also holds a Canada Research Chair in qualitative research.

She says that to some extent, the problems being faced by today's career women are similar to those that have always been faced by men when they left the workforce.

But she says that in the case of women, those problems are made more acute by ageism and by the way women have traditionally been viewed in our society.

Van den Hoonaard, who has been interested in the experiences of older women for a long time, is now studying the generation of female baby boomers reaching retirement. She will be presenting initial results of her research involving interviews with women in the Maritimes at the 2014 Congress of the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences.

"These women are pioneers," she says, explaining that women of previous generations didn't really retire: If they were homemakers, they kept right on cooking and cleaning.

"These women have to kind of make it up, because they don't have any examples in front of them.

"For these women, when they retire it's challenging for them to figure out who they are. They are asking, 'What is my identity? Who am I?'"



In many ways, she says, today's female baby boomers are experiencing the transition to retirement more like men. In fact she says they are beginning to sound like men when they talk about it.

But she says there are still significant differences between men and women, especially around the way society treats women.

"There's prejudice when you get old for both women and men," she says, "but women experience it more directly. Women don't get treated like men, and they face more ageism.

"For women, when they get older, people treat them differently. As one woman said, 'I have grey hair, and I'm short, and people don't see me anymore'."

She also said that because women, more than men, view family and the home as important, many career women find themselves falling into the traditional role of wife after retirement.

This, she says, is hard for women who have had a full career where they feel they have made an important contribution to society.

Although these may appear to be personal problems, says van den Hoonaard, the retirement of working women is also a public policy issue and a social issue.

We live, she says, in society that says you are no good unless you earn money, and women don't count unless they are beautiful.

"I think we really need to face the prejudice that exists about aging," she says.

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About the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences

Organized by the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, Congress is the largest interdisciplinary conference in Canada, and one of the largest in the world. Congress brings together 75 academic associations that represent a rich spectrum of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, including literature, history, theatre, film studies, education, music, sociology, geography, social work and many others. For more information, go to www.congress2014.ca

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